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THE RENAISSANCE OF WOMEN.

BY LADY HENRY SOMERSET.

WHAT has changed woman's outlook so that she now desires that of which her grandmother did not dream? This is the question that is asked to-day from pulpit and platform, in magazine and newspaper, with fatiguing reiteration. Is the woman of our time less feminine in her instinct, less domestic in her tastes, or less devoted to the interests of her family? As well might we ask whether the man of our time is less courageous because he no longer buckles on a coat of mail to wage an endless war with his near neighbour; less honorable because he does not avenge insult in a duel; less devout because he no longer believes that by conquering a distant land and planting the cross instead of the crescent on the heights of Jerusalem he is doing God's work in the world. Times have changed, and with the years the standard of social custom changes also. Woman, like man, is adapting herself to her environment. In ancient days her home was a great domestic manufactory of which she was the head. The flax was spun, the linen woven, by her deft fingers; the bread was baked in a glowing oven under her watchful care; and by her the perfume was distilled from summer flowers. She was the artist whose embroidery decked the cathedral and the palace; for home was not only the factory that supplied domestic wants, but the studio whence came the choicest objects of skill and beauty. But with the birth of applied science the marvellous invention of man robbed her one by one of her employments. The steel fingers of machinery replaced her skillful and ingenious hand; the city bakeries provided food; the sweet perfumes of flowers were perfectly imitated in a thousand chemical laboratories, and tapestries and silks were woven to the tune of steam while the roomy old homesteads disappeared and

rows of little houses took their place where operatives eked out a monotonous existence. The school with kindergarten attachment undertook to educate her children's powers; trained nurses watched over the pillows of the sick, and woman with folded hands looked out upon the world, her employment wellnigh gone. In view of such a situation, the reasoning mind must ask, Is not woman to adjust herself to these far-reaching changes, even as man has suited himself to the new environment that steam, electricity, and the printing-press have brought to him? The arts and crafts that centred for centuries in the home have expanded until they have become the possession of the world, and man has taken them under his supervision. Why, then, should not woman keep her native place in the world's economy by the regulation of that wider home which has now spread outside the four walls of her own house, and which we call society and government, and take her place with man in framing laws that affect the well-being of those who formerly worked within her kingdom, but who now dwell outside, in that larger family circle that we call a nation?

The arguments used by those who oppose woman's entrance to public life are in these days usually based on the line that woman is too sacred, her influence too pure and precious, to be frittered away in the sordid quarrels and mean ambitions entailed by party politics; that her presence has ever been the magnet of the home; and that the nation will be wisest and best that preserves the sanctity of its womanhood and the influence of its mothers. It is precisely because I believe in the truth of this argument that I maintain that to debar woman from any one single right, to exclude her from any prerogative, is to create for her not only a disability by reason of her sex, but to build up a barrier that must ever effectually hinder her widest influence. It is well to talk of the mother guiding the son in life, but from the hour that the boy understands that his mother's prerogatives end at the garden gate, that she has no voice whatever in the moulding of the nation's laws, that her precepts are good for the fireside but unavailing at the hearthstone of government, there insidiously creeps into the boy's thought a realization of the fact that his mother is classified by the rulers of the land with the lunatic and the idiot; and I maintain that this discovery has done more than sons are themselves aware of to undermine the influence that is

deemed so precious and yet which is sedulously preserved for "home consumption" only. Moreover, to deprive a government of the keen moral sense that is native to women as a class (though, to the great hindrance of humanity, they have too long admitted that their moral standard must necessarily be higher than that of man), is to rob the nation of a strong support by which it would undoubtedly benefit. Another argument that is brought forward to prove that woman does not need to have a share in government is that her interests are ably represented by men. If this be so, women are the only class "ably represented" by those who have in many instances a wholly separate interest from theirs. The very fact that the question of the woman's vote has been so long treated as a subject fit only for stale and silly jokes, or to be put aside with pompous platitudes, is in itself sufficient proof that women's interests are not guarded with the same care as men's; and the code of laws that places property in the hands of the husband, gives him complete power over the children, and protects him in conjugal authority over his wife, proves the impracticability of securing justice to women as a class until they themselves have an equal voice with men in the making of the law.

We have been told that woman's true work comes to her in the gentler calls of a sorrowing world; that her leisure should be spent in assuaging misery and suffering, and in the exercise of that charity which man has not the time or inclination to dispense: but there is probably no surer symptom of the change that is coming over society at large with regard to the great social problems of the age than the view now taken of the best methods of dealing with poverty and crime. This change is the outcome of the slow, but sure, sifting of social questions that is going on in the minds of all classes. Charity was considered to be a sort of moral patchwork; it was excellent for the soul of the giver, and helped the recipient to exist under circumstances that would otherwise have been intolerable. But it was, and is still, unconsciously, too often a mere ethical anæsthetic. We have many of us in England passed through the phase of going from cottage to cottage in country districts or in those village towns which abound in our land, listening to the oft-repeated story,—“twelve shillings a week, ten children, afraid to complain—the farmer from whom the wretched pittance is earned would turn us out. There was scarlet fever (or typhoid) in the village last year, the inspector came

and we may get the sewage altered. They say the water is bad." We have looked out on the sunny pastures, standing at these cottage doors, and heard that the sick baby can get no milk ; it is all sold at the farms for butter. "My husband could do with a bit of land or keep a cow, but it is all let away in big holdings, and there isn't a rood to be got." And as we have put down the half-pound of tea or the few yards of flannel on the little table, the absolute conviction has come to our minds that such charity is but a palliative to our consciences, and we go away with the feeling that with the priest and Levite we looked upon the sufferer, saw the real condition and passed by on the other side. Tennyson sang long years ago :

Lady Clara Vere de Vere,
If time be heavy on your hands,
Are there no beggars at your gate
Nor any poor about your lands?

The words were true, wherein they prescribed for the mental malady of Lady Clara, but let her not imagine that she is doing other than taking into the midst of her artificial surroundings a very little of that wholesome tonic which contact with the realities of life must bring. I do not underrate the self-denying efforts of any who give their lives to make the existences of those around them holier, purer, and more wholesome ; but I maintain that true philanthropy means the dealing with cause and not effect, searching out the root of evil and attacking it at all risks ; not pulling down the leaves from poisoned boughs in the leisure moments of a summer's day.

I am well aware that Lady Bountiful is popular ; that it is her happy fortune to minister to the wishes of all. She presides at the sumptuous dinner party, and with her fair hands carries the crumbs to the "beggars at her gate." But I know also that she will become unpopular when she dares to pass beyond the circle of her guests into that wider world where she will seek to know from those who solve such problems, the reasons that laid a fellow-man beggared at her door, and when although she succors him she determines so to work that none may take his place ; and I maintain this is the only charity to which the thinking woman can turn her powers of mind and heart to-day.

The more we seek to unravel the tangled skein of reasons that are given to prove that woman must not face the great

public questions of the time, or endeavor to enter "the maze of politics," the more clearly we understand that these many reasons resolve themselves into one, and that one is the disability of sex. It is not education that is wanting, because the higher education now places many women far above the level of the ordinary voter, some on an equality with any statesman, and the average woman on an absolute equality with the average man. Nor is it the question of property that can now bar woman's way to the polling booth. From the hour that the married woman's property was restored to her, she was at least allowed to become an individual. The grotesqueness of the old *régime* that prevailed only a short time ago in England became so apparent when a certain poor man married a rich woman and made a will by which he kindly left the woman her own property on the generous condition that she should not marry again, that as the sequel of public agitation men granted this measure of justice to women.

We are continually reminded that the whole basis of good government is founded on the fact that taxation and representation go together. It can therefore only be sex disability that deprives a woman of the power to vote when she is compelled to pay taxes. In this respect I do not find men anxious to represent women; in fact, I have never found a male citizen keenly desirous to represent my interests when the tax collector called. Again, woman is an individual, and her individual right is fully conceded when she is to pay the penalty of any ill-doing or when she receives a death sentence from the lips of a jury of men.

I presume that the argument that is supposed to be almost crushing as to the disability of woman to take her share in national politics is the fact that she does not fight; but I do not think woman does not fight because she is unable to do so. It may be true that the myths of the Amazons are lost in so hazy a past that we are not able distinctly to glean any definite facts as to their origin; but we are well aware that among savage tribes in our own time woman's strength and woman's prowess are called into action, that kings' bodyguards have been formed of women, and that as far as physical strength goes, woman, at any rate in a savage state, is as capable of bearing hardship and fatigue as man. Any one who has seen the Indian squaw carrying the baggage of the family on her back while the man leisurely

sits on his horse smoking his short pipe, cannot feel the slightest doubt as to woman's equality in physical strength; at any rate the Indian has realized it and made practical use of his knowledge.

This whole outcry of "one vote, one sword," is founded on a fallacy. It is true that the barbarous tribes who were wont to put their women in the van as fighters have all died out. To what is woman's exemption from military duties owing? To the desire of men to represent her on the battlefield? Not at all; it is owing to natural selection. The mothers who are the makers of men had to be guarded for the benefit of the tribe or the nation; otherwise that nation would suffer in its survival.

Women have a greater *rôle* than that of fighting; they are the fountain of the race, at which it recruits its losses, perpetuates its hopes, and conserves the results of victories already gained; and I maintain that if service to the nation is to count as a chief article of faith for the voter, the service—aye, and the dangerous service—that woman renders every nation is far greater than the occasional facing of a Maxim gun or the remote contingency of a bursting shell. There is hardly a woman who is not called to come face to face with death; who does not go down into the great Gethsemane of suffering, and with the dew of eternity on her brow give to the world its sons and daughters. It is woman's fight for the race, the fight in which she too often gives her life. It is a greater service to bear soldiers than to bear arms.

I now revert to the fact that there is a severe loss to the nation in the disability of woman to vote, because it places her, in the estimation of the citizenship, on a lower level than men, and it leads to the degrading belief that man can afford to have a lower standard of morals than woman. It leads, also, to the demoralizing idea that woman was created for man's pleasure, and from this concept is recruited that great army, sad and sorrowful, that has for long ages trodden the stony way of shame. There is no class of women who can ever be justly set aside to fulfil purposes of evil because it is necessary that men should sin; but it is from this immeasurable indignity that has sprung, undoubtedly, the idea that women are inferior to men, and, therefore, must be debarred the rights of citizenship. If it be true that a certain class of women must ever be appointed to fulfil the duty that Lecky terms "the mission of the sad priestess of humanity,"

I believe that the middle ages took a far more logical view of this question than we do now, for then such women were recognized among the guilds that paraded the towns on hey-days and holidays, a class whose existence was a necessity, and who, therefore, carried on no dishonorable calling. We naturally shrink from such morality as that, but the existence of any class of women who are degraded by doing that which does not unfit man morally or socially for the duties of citizen and of a future husband honored and beloved, is far more debasing in its effects upon the nation than the crude brutality of the mediæval times.

There is another argument that I believe to be, if possible, more fallacious than any yet examined; namely, that the right to assert her political individuality will cause the disruption of the home. The age is too far advanced for such arguments. Women has discovered herself; she has realized that she possesses a soul with all that that word implies; a soul fraught with that mysterious loneliness which envelops every human being that looks up to the great beyond, not knowing whence it came nor whither it is going. Shrouded in that inner recess which no man can touch, no human being approach, lies the consciousness that is always lonely save as it realizes the presence of God. And unless the marriage tie respects this individuality, instead of being the dearest and the best bond that can brighten any human life, it will become the detestable chain from which woman will pray to be released. The only way in which the tie of home can ever be destroyed will be by endeavoring to chain the woman who has as much right to be free as the husband at her side.

I believe that woman should vote because she is a different being and always will have a different work to do in life from that of man. She has a divine task to accomplish. You intrust her with the most sacred duty on earth; you ask her first to give the nation her children; you ask her to nurture and care for them; you ask her to instil into their minds the holiest aspirations that are to be their guide in after life; you ask her, with all her experience and her judgment, to look upon the world with its many social evils that her mother's eyes are swift to see while yours are blinded, and then you ask her to believe that it is "justice" that her voice should be silent, her action powerless to guard the interests of her girls whom you declare that men, and men alone, must represent. You ask her to sit through long

weary nights rocking the cradle, but when the child grows up to manhood you say that she has no right to deal with those questions that make for the weal or woe of his future life. You do not deny that in many cases women maintain the home by their own labor, that by the "sweat of their brow do they eat bread," that the children owe their education, their clothing, the roof over their heads, to the work of their mothers' hands; you do not ask the men of the state to "represent" the women when they have no one to earn a living for the children who are deprived by death of a father or deserted by a worthless husband; but only when you come to the edge of the Rubicon, where toil is merged into privilege, and penalties pass over into power, do you say to the woman, "Stand back; thus far and no farther!"

"The broadest and most far-sighted intellect," Wendell Phillips has truly said, "is utterly unable to foresee the ultimate consequences of any great social change; but ask yourselves on all such occasions if there is no element of right or wrong in the question, no principle of clear, natural justice that turns the scale; and if so, as in the past so in the future, the men of this country will take their part with perfect and abstract right, and they will see the expediency of it hereafter."

It is possible that woman may not take the same view of imperial politics as has been taken in the past by man; but man's views are changing, and it may be that woman's influence on politics has had some effect in bringing about that change. Suffice it to say that should women take a different view it may not be that it is less wise, less just, less true, but rather in this dawning day when the nations are beginning to understand the brotherhood of the race, men may learn that real brotherhood can never exist so long as one-half of humanity is ignored in the councils of the world. For eternally it will be true that "man and woman, dwarfed or god-like, fall or rise together."

The world has seen the renaissance in art and literature; the renaissance in religion; it has watched the slow dawning of the renaissance of human brotherhood: are we not now entering the epoch of the renaissance of woman?

ISABEL SOMERSET.